The Myth of the Protestant Work Ethic

John Starke

As Christians who want to think biblically and theologically about the workplace, we can always rely on the media to make us say, “Well, at least I know *that’s* not what I had in mind.” Science journalist Matthew Hutson, writing an article “Still Puritan After All These Years” for *The New York Times*, provides that service for us. In it, he attempts to summarize the “Protestant work ethic”:

Martin Luther and John Calvin argued that work was a calling from God. They also believed in predestination and viewed success as a sign of salvation. This led to belief in success as a path to salvation: hard work and good deeds would bring rewards, in life and after.

Where is the intern fact-checker when you need him? Later in the article, Hutson writes, “Calvin argued that socializing while on the job was a distraction from the assignment God gave you.” I’d love to see that source in context. Nevertheless, Hutson gives us opportunity to say more than simply *boo!* to poor caricatures of the Protestant work ethic.

God’s Work and Our Work

Hutson starts off in short-lived agreement with Protestants: “Martin Luther and John Calvin argued that work was a calling from God.” True, indeed. Calvin remarked that each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a “sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wanter about throughout life,” and that “the Lord’s calling is the beginning and foundation of well-being” (*Institutes,* 3.X.6). Similarly, Martin Luther remarks in his *Appeal to the German Ruling Class* that unless our work is from God and by his power, then “the greater the power we employ, the greater the disaster we suffer.”

And that’s about where the agreement ends and the funny business begins. From there Hutson writes, “They [Luther and Calvin] also believe in predestination and viewed success as a sign of salvation.” True, they believed in predestination, but how that relates to “success as a sign of salvation,” I’m not sure. For Calvin (and any other Protestant), it’s likely to be the opposite. In fact, it was a great comfort

to know that when success is far away from a Christian, “God is his guide in all these things.”

The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, *when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God* (emphasis mine).

We should be gentle, though, with Hutson and others who so twist the understanding of the Protestant work ethic. He’s following in the prominent footsteps of Max Weber, who in 1904 wrote his famous work, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Weber’s book unfortunately multiplied myths about Protestantism, Calvinism, vocation, and capitalism. To this day, many believe Protestants work hard so as to build evidence for salvation.

Calvin taught that there is comfort in knowing “that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.” The greater comfort, however, comes from the gospel, where Calvin says, “we are apprehended by God’s goodness and sealed by his promises.”

The Protestant understanding of vocation emerged from this *already accomplished salvation*. For Luther, the doctrine of justification by faith alone had everything to do with our status and place as workers. He complained in the *Appeal to the German Ruling Class* that Roman Catholics have created a false hierarchy of a spirituality of work, separating the “spiritual” from the “profane”—or to put it in modern terms, the “sacred” and the “secular.” Somehow, the priest and the bishop are more spiritual than the baker and the brick layer. But Luther, never to pull a punch, calls this sort of thing “guiles of the devil.”

“Those who exercise authority,” Luther says, “have been baptized like the rest of us, and have the same faith and the same gospel; therefore we must admit that they are priests and bishops.” We should be careful here. Luther doesn’t want to flatten all occupations, but to lift up all believers to “the priesthood of believers,” since all have spiritual status.

The doctrine of justification by faith and the forgiveness of our sins redirects the *aim* of our vocation. In receiving a righteousness that is not from our works or successes, we are free to serve our neighbor and benefit society and our community. This is why Lutheran theologian Gene Veith can say in *God at Work*:

[A]ll vocations are equal before God. Pastors, monks, nuns, and popes are no holier than farmers, shopkeepers, dairy maids, or latrine diggers. In the spiritual kingdom, in divine egalitarianism (which would also come to have cultural implications) peasants are equal to kings. All are sinful beings who have been loved and redeemed by Christ.

The purpose of vocation then, Veith says, "is to love and serve one's neighbor." But the Christian is only free to love and serve one's neighbor when he is not working to justify himself before God. Justification by faith changes everything.

Vocation Explained

In this video, Tim Keller—author of the forthcoming book *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*—gives a good explanation of the Protestant view of vocation and answers the two questions: (1) Why your work matters to God and (2) Why God matters to your work.

Keller's lecture was delivered in the Gospel and Culture lectures series with Redeemer's Center for Faith and Work, who held their first conference in November 2011. The Center for Faith and Work works to mobilize Christians in their professional and industry spheres as Protestant and Reformed Christians. Their second annual conference this fall features a number of insightful thinkers, including James Davison Hunter.

The Protestant work ethic needs to be demythologized and put back into its rightful place: after a sustained reflection of justification by faith alone.

Original Link:
https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-myth-of-the-protestant-work-ethic/